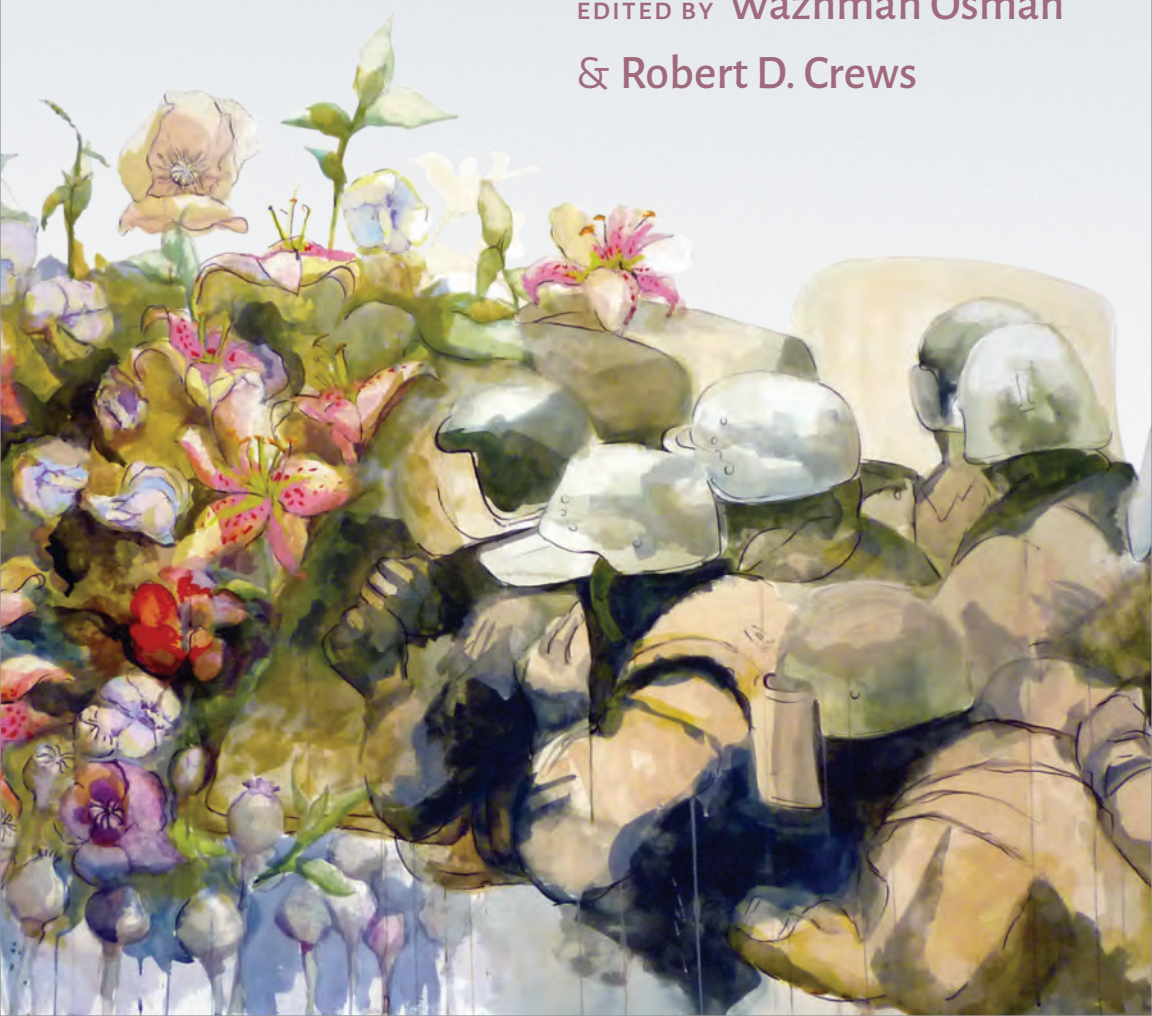


Decolonizing Afghanistan

Countering Imperial
Knowledge & Power

EDITED BY Wazmah Osman
& Robert D. Crews



Decolonizing Afghanistan



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Decolonizing Afghanistan Countering Imperial Knowledge & Power

Edited by

WAZHMAH OSMAN AND ROBERT D. CREWS

DUKE

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Introduction

Decolonizing Afghanistan: A Turning Point

Decolonizing Afghanistan features new scholarship exploring the impact of empire on Afghanistan's past and present. The book traces the ways that imperial violence and its technologies of power have shaped Afghanistan and its diaspora. It also explores how the diverse communities that make up Afghanistan have subverted, resisted, and participated in these colonial projects from the early twentieth century to the present, with a particular focus on the American intervention that began in 2001. In interrogating the relationship between knowledge and power, we examine how knowledge about Afghanistan has framed and legitimated imperial governance. Our authors follow calls within and outside of academia to decolonize knowledge about Afghanistan, to extricate the will to know from the will to conquer. Understanding and questioning imperial knowledge are essential steps toward imagining an Afghan political future beyond empire.

Our approach is to situate Afghanistan and its diasporas within the broader study of colonialism and, thus, of modernity, power, resistance, and globalization in the enduring colonial present. Knowledge about Afghanistan has historically been viewed as valuable when it has served the interests of those pursuing geopolitical, military, and, in more recent decades, humanitarian and development interventions. Moreover, as Benjamin D. Hopkins has observed, Afghanistan "is a place studied . . . to tame it" (2022). Part of this taming has come in the form of treating Afghanistan as a domain that requires diagnosis, a space that suffers from a spectrum of different cultural and political pathologies that render it at best a nuisance and at worst an enduring threat to the global community.

We propose instead to highlight colonialism as the crucial framework for understanding not only the last four decades of foreign involvement in Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet invasion of 1979—a year that also marked more direct American involvement in the country’s political affairs—but also British and Russian colonial excursions and wars from the nineteenth century onward. The neocolonial era continued from the inaugural American military operation of October 2001 through the withdrawal of US military forces in 2021. Situating Afghanistan within colonial studies represents a move to decolonize how we understand the country’s past, present, and future. It entails a fundamental rethinking of the value of studying Afghanistan and its diasporas as objects of academic knowledge. Understanding Afghanistan within the broader context of empire and colonialism is a decolonial act because it subverts the notion that Afghanistan is only knowable within the conceptual parameters of military strategy, global security, and policy—and not of empire. When people’s histories have been told for them in ways that authorize conquest—of land, culture, history, and personhood—then uncovering the stories that have remained untold or been silenced is a necessary step in undoing colonial erasure.

In this volume, we use colonialism and imperialism as distinct yet related concepts to describe foreign modes of governance over Afghanistan’s affairs from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. We understand colonialism as direct control and conquest for the economic, military, and material benefit of the colonizing power. Colonial modes of domination in Afghanistan have involved direct forms of administrative control and economic extraction and exploitation. We take imperialism to be the exercise of power by various states over Afghanistan’s sovereignty and political, cultural, and economic futures through more indirect modes of control, including the recruitment of local people and co-optations of institutions tasked with carrying out the empire’s blueprint for governance. However, we recognize that colonial and imperial modes of power work together to dominate. US imperial interests benefitted from control over the political affairs of Afghanistan: This control provided strategic military and geopolitical strength as well as tangible material and economic benefits in the form of defense contracts and the creation of NGO and development-related jobs. A further benefit was national security: A key premise of US military intervention was to eliminate terrorist training camps and havens in order to ensure the security of the United States by rebuilding Afghan society—until that was no longer in the interests of empire.

Decolonizing Methodology and the Colonial Archive

As Frantz Fanon ([1967] 2008) proposes, decolonization must entail critically interrogating the whole of a colonial situation. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) writes that to provide a critical history is to dissect “what is said to have happened.” For Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith ([1999] 2021), in order to dissect the historical record, we have to center the power disparities between researchers who were historically part of the colonizer class and the colonized subjects of research by asking whom such research has benefited and whom it has harmed. In her foundational book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, she explains how the terms *research* and *history* have become “dirty” words in Indigenous communities because they are “inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” and have caused harm to subaltern communities (Smith [1999] 2021, 1).

Moreover, as scholars of settler colonialism Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us in their foundational essay “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” because colonialism has real-world consequences for the people subjected to its various regimes of violence, we cannot treat decolonization, or migration, for that matter, as empty signifiers. Rather, we must do the hard work of seriously tracking the colonial past and present by making connections across imperial metropolises to their peripheries and across disciplines and media to uncover colonialism’s machinations and recover its subaltern losses and damages (2012). While Afghanistan was never a settler colony, it is important to examine what it means that it has been deeply impacted by the exploits of an empire (the United States, among others) that, in conducting wars and sales of military weapons for wars abroad, seeks to maintain its own economic and political power as a settler colonial society.

When it comes to the study of Afghanistan and its diasporas, there has not been sufficient reckoning with these fundamental decolonizing questions and methodological issues. Likewise, whereas intellectuals and scholars commenting on Latin America, parts of the Arabic-speaking world, and South Asia have long engaged with the problems of colonialism, the history and present of colonialism in Afghanistan and what Anila Daulatzai calls its “discursive occupation” have received far less attention (2008). This is also true for other countries, like Iraq, that have had their societies and infrastructures simultaneously torn apart and selectively rebuilt in the War on Terror. As Iraqi American scholar Zahra Ali writes, “There can be no ‘innocent’ knowledge produced on Iraq because of this history of destruction, military intervention, and occupation” (2024, 419).

This is in part due to the larger problem of the hegemony of and overreliance on the colonial archives with their imperial languages of English, French, and Russian, among others, which are spoken by many former subjects. These archives are caught up in the perpetuation of top-down imperial narratives that devalue and exclude subaltern voices, especially oppositional ones. They tend to be well funded and maintained in comparison to archives in postcolonial and war-torn nation-states, making them more accessible to researchers.

Conversely, due to colonial violence and extraction, there is a serious lack of archives that document decolonial, postcolonial, or anti-colonial activities and movements and the egregiousness of colonizers. When they do exist, they are underutilized due to a lack of fluency in local languages and their distance from the imperial metropole. Moreover, it is difficult to revise or correct the record of “what is said to have happened” when subaltern artifacts, national documents, and media have been repeatedly looted and pillaged from museums, archives, and libraries—or worse yet bombed, burned, destroyed, or forever lost in the upheaval of war and displacement. This pattern of heritage destruction and extraction is of course not just a relic of the past but has been a key feature of twenty-first-century wars and their spoils in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other sites of the Global War on Terror (Aikins 2021; Bahrani 2023, 2025; Feroozi 2004; González Zaran-dona et al. 2023; Saleh 2020; Slyomovics 2021; Tarzi 2023).

In the media, in think tanks, and in universities, knowledge on Afghanistan is produced by scholars, policy makers, diplomats, and veterans who tend to have a vested interest in or be materially invested in the imperial project. Often, they reproduce top-down analytical perspectives and grand overarching narratives. They amplify the dominant narratives about Afghanistan by citing one another in an echo chamber, removed from the on-the-ground situation in Afghanistan and the lived experiences of those most affected by these narratives. For example, American “experts” on the region have produced “reams of scholarship on ‘tribes’ or ‘Islamism,’ which recycle, at best, British colonial strategies of control and domination” (Ahmed 2011, 65).

Heeding the call of decolonial and feminist scholars, decolonizing scholarship, then, requires centering the voices of indigenous, local, subaltern, colonized, and/or hybrid voices of those who see outside/inside of empire and who thus have produced important knowledge that we can learn from to change the status quo. Therefore, throughout the writing process of this book, we have tried to cite, engage with, feature, and give space to the work of scholars and practitioners who have been excluded or sidelined from the dominant threads of academia, postcolonial theory, and

Afghanistan studies and who are producing work outside the echo chamber of the establishment. This includes both those who have come before us—who have influenced us and whom we build on—and emergent voices.

Afghanistan and Colonialism in Historical Perspective

The exclusion of Afghanistan from the main currents of postcolonial studies and studies of empire is also attributable to a dominant conception across the social sciences and humanities that Afghanistan does not offer a generative example of contemporary colonial dynamics. Westerners and some Afghan nationalists have long claimed that Afghanistan was “never colonized.” In a similar vein, nationalists and Orientalists alike have celebrated (or castigated) the country as the “graveyard of empires”—a cliché invoked by former President Joe Biden in announcing the American withdrawal in August 2021 in defense of his assertion that the country had always been stuck in a hopeless condition of ungovernable anarchy. As decolonial studies scholars have begun to demonstrate, however, these tropes elide the fact that multiple colonial forces have shaped Afghan politics, society, and culture throughout the modern era (see Nivi Manchanda’s chapter in this volume). To be sure, Afghans avoided the fate of their immediate neighbors in Central and South Asia as they were never fully absorbed by European colonial powers. But colonialism has historically been about far more than physical presence and direct administrative control over a territory’s political system, economy, and social life (Veracini 2011).

According to colonial studies scholar Lorenzo Veracini, “Colonialism is primarily defined by exogenous domination. It thus has two fundamental and necessary components: an original displacement and unequal relations” (2011, 1). If we employ this more expansive, multiscalar definition of colonialism, it becomes clear that Afghanistan has in fact been subject to imperial modes of domination. Indeed, beginning in the late eighteenth century, Afghan rulers were forced to surrender territories. From the early nineteenth century, treaties between the British and the Afghan governments during the formation of the early Afghan state reflected a quasi-colonial status. British colonial forces based in India challenged Afghan leaders in two Anglo-Afghan wars that resulted in temporary occupations of Afghan territory and considerable destruction. Emerging on the edges of British and tsarist Russian expansionism in the late nineteenth century, the boundaries of the Afghan state were redrawn by British and Russian cartographers, reshaping it as a colonial frontier with gradations of foreign

dominance and authority (Hanifi 2011, 2012; Hopkins and Marsden 2012; Manchanda 2017). London controlled Afghanistan's foreign policy until 1919 when Afghanistan won its independence in the Third Anglo-Afghan War, known as the War of Independence. Postindependence, Afghan leaders joined global anti-colonial movements and joined the United Nations for leverage against future colonial incursions (Leake 2022). Afghanistan became a model for anti-colonialists from across neighboring British India to Egypt who sought to launch their own resistance (Wide 2014; see also Marya Hannun's chapter in this volume) and were thus subjected to colonial surveillance and subterfuge.

At the same time, some Afghan rulers, especially Amir 'Abd al-Rahman (r. 1880–1901), exploited imperial patronage (including a ten-year sanctuary in Russian-occupied Central Asia) and subsidies and weapons to subjugate populations across the territory that would eventually make up the Afghan state. As Robert D. Crews has noted, the political elite of Afghanistan has had a complicated relationship with foreign empires, both participating in imperial projects and resisting them (2015). Likewise, as we show in this book, some Afghan people have participated in imperial rule while others have challenged it, and perhaps all citizens of an imperial nation are implicated. Furthermore, long stretches of occupation and imperial rule have extended to people's minds and senses of self, whereby some come to internalize racist imperial tropes about themselves and other Afghans (Chio-venda 2019; Masood 2024).

Using complex mechanisms ranging from diplomatic alliances and intermarriage to forced resettlement, mass expulsions, executions, and enslavement, Amir 'Abd al-Rahman drew on colonial technologies and resources to conquer territory and communities to build the modern Afghan state. This is another key dimension of colonialism in Afghanistan's past, one with an enduring afterlife for communities that have sustained in their collective memory this traumatic period of subjugation. Many Hazara intellectuals today recall the era of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman as the inaugurating moment of genocide that laid the foundation for more than a century of discrimination and violence whose legacies endure today. Turkic communities in northern Afghanistan have retained similar memories of conquest and loss born in this crucial period of state consolidation (see Zohra Saed's chapter in this volume). As Nazif M. Shahrani has pointed out, this "internal colonialism" was "aided and abetted by old colonialist powers" (2002).

Foreign powers would continue to shape Afghan sovereignty in similarly important ways in the second half of the twentieth and the twenty-first

centuries. Local leftists seized power in 1978, and the Soviet Union would oversee the brutal occupation of the country from 1979 to 1989. Washington was already a party to this conflict when it began backing anti-Soviet resistance forces in 1979; in 2001, American forces would be on the ground in Afghanistan launching what would be known in the US as “America’s longest war,” which inaugurated the Global War on Terror.

Yet what to call this era remains contested: Many critics have labeled it a twenty-year “occupation.” But whether we refer to it as an *occupation*, *neo-imperialism*, or *nation-building interventions*, materially speaking, as Wazhmah Osman (2020) has noted, the post-9/11 era is similar to the colonizations of the past in that Afghanistan did not have full sovereignty over its airspace, airwaves, or land. With its powerful military might behind it, the US government had jurisdiction over Afghan airspace above a certain altitude; over Afghan airwaves, as the largest donor of media and communication development aid; and over Afghan land, via its ever-growing military bases and prisons, including secret black sites reminiscent of when most of Afghanistan’s affairs were under control of the British Empire until the Third Anglo-Afghan War. Whether or not this moment has even ended is an ongoing point of dispute among Afghan citizens and the diaspora. While the last US military and diplomatic personnel left in August 2021, American power lingers, not least within what the Biden administration called its “over the horizon” capacity to wage war on Afghan territory via satellite surveillance and drone technology, as well as through first the Biden and then the Trump administrations’ ongoing control of Afghanistan’s finances demonstrated by the withholding of the Central Afghanistan Bank’s assets in the Federal Reserve Bank, with half potentially reserved for families of the victims of 9/11.

The Racialized Afghan Other and Failure Tropes: Dismantling Dominant Colonial Historiography and Narratives

In the overlap between academic and policy circles, Afghanistan has frequently been characterized as a “failed,” “broken,” “fragmented,” or “collapsed” nation (Coburn and Larson 2014; Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Rubin 2002). In this respect, Afghanistan is one of numerous parts of the world that Western scholars have characterized as being hopelessly doomed to foreign aid dependency, poverty, sectarianism, and

violence—not because of colonial misrule or exploitation but rather because of presumed predispositions to barbarity, militancy, and savagery, which are depicted as innate cultural and racial characteristics. Postcolonial scholars of the Middle East and Asia have debunked these racist portrayals (Abrahamian 2013; Abu-Lughod 1998; Asad 1973; Chatterjee 1997; Elyachar 2025; Fahmy 2009; Mitchell 2000, 2002). Contrary to how Afghan elites—monarchs, governors, mayors, and other politicians across multiple centuries—are represented in the Western academy, they were not monolithic nor all despotic like Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman, described earlier. Because he perpetuates dominant racist tropes about Afghans, Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman has an overdetermined place in the Western canon and has been portrayed as emblematic of all Afghan leaders.

Starting in the early twentieth century, a number of modernizing Afghan leaders including Amanullah Khan (the grandson of Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman), his wife, Queen Soraya, and his father-in-law, Mahmud Tarzi, ushered in rights for women and minorities and the beginnings of print journalism and other media (see Hannun’s chapter). In the second half of the twentieth century, playing off decades of competitive schemes between the United States and the USSR, Zahir Shah and his cousin and prime minister, Daoud Khan, launched a series of large-scale public-works programs and ambitious infrastructure projects including funding and developing the arts, education, media, and industrial production. The establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1964 codified elected parliamentary politics, civil rights, and freedom of speech. Although these new policies and the legislature were often top-down and limited in their capacity, they nonetheless expanded the public sphere and gave rise to ground-up social justice movements and the proliferation of diverse and oppositional media outlets and political parties. Demands for more democracy and parity by women, students, ethnic minorities, and the working class intensified through protests and the media. These movements along with divergent ideologies among the royal family and Soviet subterfuge led to the toppling of the monarchy and the subsequent takeover of the country by USSR-backed communist leaders.

However flawed, this was an era of major political, social, economic, and cultural experimentations and transformations. For example, in her ethnographic and historical studies of radio in Afghan society, Mejgan Massoumi (2021, 2022) writes that for Afghans, the 1960s and 1970s inspired

robust sociopolitical movements. Afghans came to see their internal struggles as part of international decolonial, anti-imperial, and prodemocracy movements. Radio broadcast the pulse of these events, revealing the talents of a people responding to these “accidents of history” through music, poetry, and literature. Yet, like most of Afghan history, in the Western canon this era too is commonly subsumed under the rubric of failure, “Third World despotism,” and corrupt “rentier state” politicking enabled by imperial financing and patronage networks.

Likewise, we cannot automatically dismiss all the nation-building projects and programs that emerged in the post-9/11 period as imperialist endeavors on the basis that they were financed with international development aid tied to the War on Terror economy. Certainly, the global development infrastructure is deeply entrenched in the hegemonic infrastructure of imperialism and provides a moral cover for imperial violence. Yet, as Osman (2020) has written in her ethnography of post-9/11 media and development, it is important to at least partially detangle the “development gaze” from the “imperialist gaze” because while many development projects were indeed mired in foreign and Afghan corruption and extraction, resulting in power grabbing and the abuse of power (SIGAR 2018; USGAO 2011), some yielded positive results to varying degrees and at various times. For example, despite the continued suppression of anti-imperialist activists, journalists, and whistleblowers on the home front in the West, the internationally funded Afghan media sector boom was largely deemed a success especially in the first decade before violence against frontline media makers significantly increased. Despite pressures and constraints from abroad and within, studies have shown how Afghan media makers used a range of strategies to provide much-needed entertainment and news and information critical of foreign and Afghan elites (Osman 2020; Sienkiewicz 2016).

Development was generative in some instances and sectors not only due to the hard work and ingenuity of Afghans and their foreign collaborators but also because the country’s political economy, while mostly funded by US aid, was not solely reliant on it—rather it was international in scope. The dangers of foreign aid and dependency, as Osman (2019b) has shown with regards to Russia and Afghanistan’s neighbors to the north, manifest when countries’ economic, media, and political systems are unilaterally dependent financially on one powerful donor country, thereby making

them vulnerable to imperial coercion and likely to replicate those same kleptocratic patronage networks and imperial authoritarian systems domestically.

Moreover, as prominent decolonial anthropologists have demonstrated, “It is difficult to exoticize others or to maintain fictions of bounded and untouched communities of difference when one includes media [and culture] in one’s purview” (Ginsburg et al. 2002). Even the supposed “unruly borderlands” and “savage frontier” between Afghanistan and then British India, long characterized in the Western historical canon as a hotbed of the usual colonial tropes of lawlessness, violence, and seediness, are in fact more complex in their excess and layers (Ahmed 2011; Hopkins 2020; see Manchanda in this volume and 2020). New ethnographic research is demonstrating that the borderlands are teeming with culture and media from around the world. Local bazaars and their shopkeepers and media technicians have become hubs in global circuits of images, sounds, and cosmopolitanism, where new media is translated, marketed, and sold as audio and video CDs, digital files, and other formats (Cooper 2024a; Osman 2020). As shown in Timothy P. A. Cooper’s work on Pashto film and music, in these networks of exchange and dissemination borderlands become “interfaces” of communication (2024b). Likewise, recent work along the northern border of Afghanistan, also commonly portrayed as a zone of violence and trafficking, has instead demonstrated the notion of “borders as resources” for cross-border markets, medical infrastructure, and personal reconnections, defining the community relationships between the two sides (Sadozai 2021).

Yet the dominant colonial mode of thinking about the Afghan past and present reduces all nuances to a simplistic narrative of failure and despotism. The same imperial pundits and scholars who are quick to point out the supposed inadequacies of Afghans in the pursuit to modernize conveniently look the other way or rationalize their own governments’ brutal record of repression and anti-democratic activities domestically and abroad, even during highly authoritarian regimes. They “outsource” patriarchy and racism as the domains of the Global South and East (Grewal 2013; Mitra 2020; O’Sullivan 2023; Wardak 2018). Talal Asad explains in his book *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* how the West perpetuates its dominance over the Third World by inscribing its power in a universalist language of rights that is asymmetrically and selectively applied (1973). Although US and NATO leaders privileged anthropology as

a tool of counterinsurgency, especially from 2009 onward, racist colonial discourse about Afghanistan has pervaded most academic disciplines across centuries and has framed some of the most consequential policy decisions made by foreigners for Afghans over the past twenty years. In this view, the Afghan “other” is defined by a static culture and bound by archaic traditions. Ostensibly mired in backwardness, misogyny, and tribalism, Afghans are represented as fierce, militant, isolationist, and inherently opposed to the forces of cultural exchange, pluralism, and global modernity.

Western mainstream media accounts, including best-selling books, news, network television programs and serials, and Hollywood films, have for the most part reinforced these stereotypes (Bose 2020; Ivanchikova 2019; Osman 2022; Osman and Redrobe 2022; Osman et al. 2021). In this way, popular culture echoes and amplifies the views of fervent imperial war hawks and militant xenophobes on the right and left, for whom nation-building and democracy are a futile enterprise for “backward” people and countries incapable of civilizing and modernizing. Based on their racist ideology, they believe the only way to engage with unruly Middle Eastern and Asian people is through control and force via direct attacks or clandestine coups. On the home front, this dehumanizing rhetoric has led to rampant Islamophobia, hate-mongering, and hate crimes against Muslims and those mistaken for Muslims (Kazi 2019; Kumar [2012] 2021; Kundnani 2014).

The dominant “failed state” paradigm and Orientalist Afghan tropes erase not only historical achievements, such as periods of democratization and modernization, but also the fundamental agency, creativity, and intellect of the Afghan people—thus perpetuating the false notion that first the Soviets and then the United States and its European allies introduced Afghans to democracy and modernization and that the country’s failings are entirely the fault of Afghans themselves. Punctuated by Biden’s invocation of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires,” a place that could never be “stable, united, and secure,” these very ideas guided Washington’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and American resignation in the face of the collapse of the US-backed republic and the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021. Conversely, when scholars take into account local and diasporic political contestations, cultural productions, and social movements, as the writers in this book do, they upend the false binaries and simplistic discourses of progress and failure that undergird imperial humanitarian/human rights intervention.

Afghan Decoloniality in Global Comparative Perspective

Including Afghanistan in colonial studies, then, is also a decolonial move because it refuses to consider Afghanistan as a political and cultural anomaly. Instead, it situates Afghanistan within a broader conversation on imperialism and sovereignty. Recognizing its meaningful resonances with other contexts makes it possible to draw connections and build transnational decolonial solidarity and futures. As described earlier, throughout most of the modern era, Afghanistan has survived in the face of enormous colonial pressures exerted by multiple states, though it has done so by preserving various aspects of sovereignty as a quasi-colonized state. As a quasi-colonized nation-state with semisovereignty over its own affairs, Afghanistan could be considered an example of what anthropologist and Indigenous studies scholar Audra Simpson has called “nested sovereignty” (2016). “Nested sovereignty” refers to how Indigenous models of self-rule may persist within the broader sovereignty paradigm of the settler colonial state. Over the last forty years, Afghanistan has been subject to what Carole McGranahan and Ann Laura Stoler have termed “imperial formations” (2009, 8). For all of their professed ideological differences, Soviet and US elites facilitated a logic of governance in which the autonomy of Afghans would be, to use McGranahan and Stoler’s language, at once “partial” and “deferred.” Imagining a break from a past stamped by backwardness and brutality, both the Soviet and US imperial projects promised liberation and the capacity to make (at least some) Afghans modern. Similar to the political contexts analyzed by McGranahan and Stoler, colonizers in Afghanistan envisioned “new subjects that must be relocated to be productive and exploitable, dispossessed to be modern, disciplined to be independent, converted to be human, stripped of old cultural bearings to be citizens, coerced to be free” (2009, 8).

There are several more parallels that could be explored between Afghanistan and contemporary imperial formations and colonial dynamics elsewhere, such as in Haiti (Hudson 2017; Pierre 2023), Puerto Rico (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019), the Pacific Islands (Kim 2023), and Palestine (Ayyash 2019; Erakat 2019; Yaqub 2023). While refusing to make historical equivalences, we suggest that the long histories of colonial rule, experiences of mass displacement, and politically active diasporas in those contexts offer important nodes of comparison. As Jemima Pierre (2023) and Peter James Hudson (2017) have written, the US imperial project in

Haiti has involved the outsourcing of control to other countries in the Caribbean and Latin America. The United States and Canada's backing of a Kenyan ground troop invasion of Haiti is the most recent example of this. The multinational coalition of peacekeeping troops, financial advisors, and humanitarian aid workers has functioned to keep Haiti in dependent relationships and quell more revolutionary efforts toward self-determination. Similarly, imperialism in Afghanistan (while led in the last two decades by the United States) has involved a multinational collective of countries and their aid and military apparatuses providing multilateral cover to the imperial project. Likewise, a multiethnic group of people from the Afghan diaspora have been recruited to do the work of nation-building, in the name of humanitarianism and empowerment. In that sense, the War on Terror was as much about cultivating new political subjects at home and abroad—who could see themselves as empowered and as part of the reconstructed civil society of a “failed state”—as it was about the imperial state winning battles.

The case of Puerto Rico also offers important examples for critically assessing the difficulties of reclaiming sovereignty in contexts of prolonged imperial rule. As Yarimar Bonilla writes, in order to “unsettle sovereignty” and transcend its “constrained forms,” it is necessary to question the desire to be included by the empire: “I repeatedly say that when allies feel the need to assert that Puerto Ricans are US citizens, they should instead ask themselves if what really needs to be asserted is that the US is an empire” (2020). As Jodi Kim (2023) has recently shown in *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries*, US colonial occupations in the Caribbean and Pacific used inclusive language to justify ongoing rule. These places were situated as part of the “domestic US” as unincorporated territories, and their subjects were referred to as US nationals. Such an arrangement allowed imperial control over certain aspects of life but also ensured the steady flow of labor migration to the US mainland. “Sovereignty” was marked by both selective care and extractivism. Kim’s exploration of the US occupation in the Pacific also reveals a form of metapolitical authority through the use of debt imperialism and military dependency to indirectly rule over sovereign nations (2023).

Similar discussions are unfolding regarding which Afghan subjects are deserving of being given refuge by the US government in the aftermath of war. When organizations increasingly use the language of allyship to make the case that Afghans working as interpreters and other military personnel must be given refuge to express gratitude for their service to the US military, what does such a claim imply about other Afghans who had no

association with the US government during the war? What “non-allies” are produced in such discourses of inclusion and worthiness? What kinds of conditions do people need to meet in order to be embraced and protected by the empire? Studies have shown that marginalized communities, including the subaltern/colonized, immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ people, and women have used their incorporation into and service to the security state apparatus to improve their second-class status and partial inclusion at the expense of their own and other marginalized communities (Osman 2019c; Puar 2007). The mass displacement wrought by the 2021 military withdrawal affected people from a range of class backgrounds and statuses and shed light on the hierarchies of “grievability” and “suffering” that underpins the US immigration system and war in Afghanistan more generally, hence determining who is viewed as worthy of extraction and refuge (Butler 2009; Fassin 2012). Tausif Noor’s, Gazelle Samizay’s, and Helena Zeweri’s chapters in this volume offer important case studies on how postwithdrawal Afghans and diasporic Afghans have collectively organized and mobilized against these exclusionary and racist systems through art and activism. Paniz Musawi Natanzi has also shown the limits of working within European state institutions of art and culture, which readily fund but also actively censor Afghan creatives who critique NATO’s mission in Afghanistan (2024). The limits on free media and public protest in the West are also coming into sharp focus with the violent crackdowns on protestors and firings of critics of the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Likewise, the rise and spread of anti-immigrant movements across Europe and North America are revealing the limits of even selective care and partial inclusion.

Afghanistan and the Colonial Knowledge Economy: Gatekeeping, Producing, and Censoring

At the root of the various colonial projects that have targeted Afghanistan in the modern era has been the impulse to create knowledge about the country and its peoples that would serve colonial power. Since the early nineteenth century, knowledge about Afghanistan has been entangled with British, Russian, European, and, later, Soviet and American colonial exploits. British colonial authorities claiming expertise about all matters related to Afghans and Afghanistan have left a long legacy that has colored how the world has imagined Afghanistan to the present. “The epistemological

impact of British colonialism,” argues Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, “determined the categories used to understand Afghanistan” (2012, 89). The career of Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859), a Scottish statesman whose work influenced British colonial knowledge projects, is a good example of how the colonial apparatus appropriates research for its own benefit. As Nivi Manchanda has shown, Elphinstone himself was interested in delineating the similarities between his own Scottish clan and various communities in Afghanistan (2020). However, many of his problematic generalizations about Pashtuns being troublesome and unruly were reappropriated by British diplomats in future colonial missions and used to justify the need for British control. These early racist colonial tropes gained neocolonial currency in the War on Terror, as Pashtuns were recast as “terrorists” and “criminals” by the imperialists, which was then taken up by local “partner governments” in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Durrani 2022; Osman 2020; Wardak 2018).

In the late twentieth century, the USSR, too, generated colonial knowledge about Afghanistan to justify Soviet interventions and rule. Where the Kremlin saw leftist allies whose floundering revolution needed “saving” by Red Army troops in 1979, President Ronald Reagan would frame the Afghan opposition, the mujahideen, as like-minded “freedom fighters.” Moscow condemned them as “terrorists,” while Washington embraced them as crucial partners in a global cold war. For some of the mujahideen, the lesson of their military victory over the Red Army and the Soviet withdrawal was that jihad (a “holy struggle” or “war” undertaken in the name of Islam) provided a roadmap for the future of Afghanistan—and the world. It is important to note that the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—partners in driving the Soviets from Afghanistan—played a key role in fomenting the jihad. They funded madrassas (religious schools), provided textbooks that reified jihad with lessons like “*J [jeem in the local languages] is for Jihad,*” and indoctrinated poor Afghan orphan and refugee boys in the border towns of Pakistan and Iran in Islamism and militancy. For many observers, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan appeared to be proof of the failure of Soviet socialism and of the inevitable triumph of “the West.” American elites remained confident that the inability of the Soviets to defeat Afghan rebels pointed to flaws in how the Soviets conducted warfare, highlighting their brutal disregard for civilian casualties.

Paradoxically, the Soviet approach to Afghanistan had been built on a very different view of “friendship” between Afghans and themselves (to use the language that framed expert discussions of Afghan politics

in St. Petersburg and Moscow; see Robert D. Crews's chapter). Like the British, Russian and later Soviet experts developed a mapping of Afghanistan's diverse populations that drew on contemporary Orientalist tropes and imaginings. Russian and Soviet elites were particularly drawn to understanding—and manipulating—ethnic and religious differences among communities in Afghanistan. Afghanistan appeared to be a potential anti-British ally, with Pashtuns—whom Russian and Soviet observers viewed as innately unruly—seeming to be ripe for incitement to rebellion against British control of the Indo-Afghan frontier. Simultaneously, in the north of Afghanistan they identified non-Pashtun communities who had suffered exploitation by Afghan authorities and who thus seemed amenable to rebelling against the Afghan state itself in the event of necessity. What they imagined to be the “anti-colonial” and “anti-imperialist” instincts of Afghans appeared as a powerful force lying dormant until awakened by Russian or Soviet “friends” during their invasion and ten-year occupation. A sense of failed “friendship,” of mutual incomprehension, and of alienation from their ostensible allies and the physical space of Afghanistan ultimately undermined Soviet confidence in their mission and, crucially, fueled a violent hostility toward the Afghan population as a whole.

Beginning in 2001, the US-led Global War on Terror produced its own technocratic experts to explain Afghanistan in ways that facilitated colonial control. From the outset, American officials pledged to avoid the pitfalls that seemed to make the Soviets so unwelcome and to prove that this was a wholly different kind of intervention. The American project produced a wide-ranging interest in the country and an influx across a number of domains—including policymakers, NGO practitioners, aid workers, media makers, and the US military. Yet their multipronged approach and wide-ranging nation-building projects were still undergirded by and viewed through the prism of military, policy, and war. The recruitment of academic knowledge informed counterinsurgency approaches and was essential to projects such as the “Human Terrain System,” a technique of mapping Afghan communities based on the proposition that anthropological knowledge was necessary to pacify them. Nomi Stone's ethnography of Iraq War simulation actors sums up the relationship between knowledge about the distant “other” and its military domination. These simulations, Stone writes, “offer another iteration in the long history of the entanglement between militarism and ‘culture’ and the

'human sciences.' . . . In this history, cultural knowledge has long danced with conflict, from anthropology's colonial beginnings, through World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the present" (2022, 8). This is echoed by Morwari Zafar's chapter in this volume, "Operationalizing 'Afghan Culture': Role-Playing and Translation in US Military Counterinsurgency Training," which examines how Afghan Americans and "Afghan culture" were operationalized in US military training in biased ways that presented backwardness, conflict, and terrorism as extensions of Afghan cultural and social values. At the same time, various organizations also utilized academic scholarship (much as Elphinstone's was used) to aid and abet more "benign" projects such as USAID gender-empowerment activities and infrastructural development, some of which proved to be shortsighted and mired in corruption (Kandiyoti 2005; Khan 2015; Osman 2020; SIGAR 2018; see Purnima Bose's chapter).

Research and learning about Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era were thus highly refracted through a military and policy lens and was designed to be useful to think tanks and research institutes that were either formally or loosely affiliated with the US/NATO military and development projects. "As a consequence of the current US-led war in Afghanistan," writes Munazza Ebtikar, "the Anglophone work produced on Afghanistan directly influences the ways in which Washington perceives the country and its inhabitants. The power to represent and theorize about Afghanistan is located in the West, which has produced knowledge to establish economic, political, and cultural power over the region and its inhabitants" (2020). In sum, emissaries of knowledge have always been needed in emergent colonial economies of knowledge production.

Much like during the heyday of colonialism, during the twenty-year Global War on Terror, colonial knowledge abounded. But that abundance of colonial knowledge has also proved dangerously narrow and violently myopic and "produced a more intense silencing of Afghan voices" (Zeweri 2022, 10). Afghans and diasporic Afghans who have not properly expressed their gratitude to the imperial state or, worse yet, have been critical of it have been silenced, censored, and cut off from the comforts and privileges of empire. We see this in the silencing of Afghan and Pakistani activists like Malalai Joya and Malala Yousafzai and women's movements when they break from the imperial feminist "victim/savior" script to hold the US ruling elite accountable for the rise of Islamism and extremism in

their homelands (Osman 2019a). Relatedly, the same media pundits and politicians who vociferously clamored on behalf of Afghan women's rights post-9/11, turning the spotlight on Afghan women's plight under the Taliban in their first incarnation, are, postwithdrawal, eerily silent. They have turned their spotlight away from Afghan women's suffering and protest movements against the Taliban 2.0, highlighting the duplicity of the imperial feminist agenda to "save Afghan women" (Osman and Bajoghli 2024). Feminists from the region are caught between fighting local misogynist hardliners, who suppress women's rights in the name of "anti-imperialist" national unity and security, and Western misogynist war hawks, who readily use their activism as a ruse to further their imperial incursions and calls for regime change. That is why, in the case of Iran, where women's rights have been suppressed since the 1979 revolution, Manijeh Moradian has called for an "intersectional anti-imperialism," making connections between domestic and foreign structures of violence (2021, 214–246).

Mechanisms of imperial censorship, erasure, and policing are always evolving and expanding, extending to the study of decoloniality. The same right-wing circles who have been attacking and policing critical race theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are also attacking decolonial studies by trying to ban books, theories, and even the words themselves. They fear historical and present-day truths and calls for justice and parity. When it comes to Afghanistan, the stakes of knowledge production have always been high, as knowledge has directly impacted the ways that imperial powers have engaged in Afghanistan and therefore impacted how Afghan civilians have been treated in the international system.

Decolonial Alternatives and Futures

Our book challenges the dominant narratives that, since 2001, have sought to justify a military-led nation-building project in Afghanistan. One of the central claims made by the military-knowledge-policy apparatus following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan was that this intervention was a more benign form of imperial rule than others (see Wazhmah Osman's chapter in this volume). Yet, in analyzing such claims, we must revisit the question, Whose lives and voices mattered, and whose were sidelined? What kinds of analyses were considered important, and to what end was information mobilized? This means taking an inventory

of the recent colonial past and present by revealing their erasures *and* recovering and telling the indigenous, local, and diasporic stories that were never told.

The contributors to this volume do just that: Building on their cultural connections and fluency, they present Afghanistan in terms unfettered by the overlapping hegemony of pundits, politicians, and scholars. In this way, the book represents a critical intervention in knowledge production about Afghanistan. By offering critical perspectives on the nexus of academic and military knowledge production, we show how Afghanistan and its diaspora are and have been a transnational and globally mobile society deeply attuned to global developments, communication technologies, and the flow of ideas and discourses about Afghans and Afghanistan, rather than apolitical subjects who passively accept imperial interventions and knowledge. We explore how Afghanistan and its diasporas remain deeply aware of, impacted by, and still in the throes of colonial and imperial matrices of power.

Indeed, decolonial studies is increasingly moving in the direction of “thinking otherwise,” as significantly laid out in other edited volumes and series such as *On Decoloniality* (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) and *Constructing the Pluriverse* (Reiter 2018). For Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, decoloniality must be an affirmative epistemological project that is rooted in highlighting the pluriverse, the many “local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, narratives, and struggles against the modern/colonial order and for an otherwise.” In that sense, Mignolo and Walsh seek to highlight movements, efforts, and projects that move beyond “resistance” and toward “re-existence,” which they define, borrowing from Adolfo Albán Achinte, as “‘the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity’” (2018, 3). Likewise, Zahra Ali, referring to her “Critical Studies of Iraq” initiative—but equally applicable to Afghanistan—writes that we need to foster “the development of an independent research agenda [as] opposed to research ‘on Iraq,’” one that sustains “critical thinking, social justice, and peace” and imagines a future beyond empire and violence (2024, 421). In an imperial ecosystem where Afghanistan has always been “spoken for” in the words of Nivi Manchanda (see her chapter), criticism featuring the contributions of Afghan heritage scholars, activists, journalists, and artists, as well as other ground-up perspectives that are usually sidelined or silenced by the establishment, like those included in this book, is an affirmative step toward decolonization.

In the analyses developed throughout this volume, we open up intellectual space to think more affirmatively about what decoloniality as a

political, epistemological, and cultural project can look like in Afghanistan and its diasporas—a project that values all people and believes that basic human rights to freedom, justice, resources, peace, and life should not be contingent on service and servitude to the imperial state. Part of this epistemological effort is to undo the racist preconception of Afghans and Afghanistan as politically and culturally insular—by contrast, the country’s cultural lineages, its political histories, and its many intellectual traditions are shaped by a range of transnational and global encounters, which this volume highlights.

Taking inspiration from Amahl Bishara’s analysis of decolonizing anthropology, such work “requires an expansion of the bounds of politics, consideration of who can participate, and reconsideration of what the goals of political action are. It entails working toward liberations that are always plural” (2023, 396). Thus, decolonization also means creating spaces that value a plurality of voices, lived experiences, and positionalities. Due to long-standing global inequalities, almost a half century of war, mass displacement, and precarious access to academic institutions, Afghan-heritage scholars have rarely found it easy to access or navigate institutions that produce, disseminate, and market academic knowledge (Daulatzai et al. 2022). These include but are not limited to universities (as graduate students, faculty), academic journals, policy research institutes, and government agencies. The voices of Afghan nationals, diasporic Afghans, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities, nonacademics, and practitioners who speak critically of the war have been especially marginalized from both public discourse and academic conversations about Afghanistan, while the voices of those who perpetuate the dominant discourse, despite usually having little or no cultural or language fluency or connection, are often exalted and given the platforms to speak for Afghans and determine policy (Daulatzai et al. 2022).

Over the course of the US war and even since the American withdrawal, there have been numerous conferences, symposiums, plenaries, publications, task forces, and other public and private forums at universities and other venues about various aspects of Afghanistan, including women’s rights, archives and archaeology, arts and culture, and its political future more broadly, without the inclusion of any Afghan or Afghan diasporic experts. For example, the congressionally mandated Afghanistan War Commission, tasked with assessing the US war in Afghanistan thus far has no Afghan or Afghan American commissioners or academics. Like the many other examples of censorship and erasure shared throughout the

volume, these occlusions too are a form of silencing. After all, as scholars of feminist science studies (e.g., Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Londa Schiebinger, and Lorraine Daston) and revisionist anthropologists (e.g., Faye Ginsburg) have posited through “standpoint epistemology” and the “parallax effect,” different points of view frame and explain the same phenomenon in different ways, sometimes complementary and sometimes not. For example, when it comes to the highly scrutinized gender and sexuality practices and problems of Middle Easterners and Asians, heritage and hyphenated or hybrid scholars have explained and framed hot-button issues like honor (*namus/namoos*), honor killings, homosociality, queerness, *bacha bazi* (pederasty), *bacha posh* (girls dressing as boys), and *baad* exchanges (offering girls in marriage to resolve blood feuds) entirely differently and in more complex and less sensationalistic terms than their Western counterparts (Abdi 2024; Abu-Lughod 1998; Ali 2018; Manchanda 2015; Munhazim 2025; Najmabadi 2005; Osman 2020, 2023; Shakhsari 2012; see Zafar’s chapter in this volume).

While pointing to this erasure, we recognize that many non-Afghans, including the ones featured in this volume, have written thoughtfully about the country and that, likewise, some Afghan scholars have fallen into parochialism and bias in their analyses. Our point is not to neatly delineate who can speak but rather to center perspectives that provide alternatives to those traditionally centered when generating knowledge about Afghanistan, be it in academia, policy circles, news, or development. It would be shortsighted to suggest that decolonizing knowledge about Afghanistan begins or ends with the racial and ethnic makeup of those who produce knowledge. As scholars of multiculturalism have written, multiculturalism, while an important tool for expanding whose experiences get to shape policy and discourse, can also fall short of actually overhauling discriminatory and supremacist structures and their underlying premises, by tending to privilege a politics of recognition over a politics of transformation (Hale 2002; Povinelli 2002). At the same time, the right-wing and “nativist” attacks on diversity initiatives in US universities will further decrease the hiring and retention of minority scholars. Put affirmatively, to paraphrase Black and Indigenous feminist activists and scholars, if our oppression is linked then so is our liberation and so let us work together (Angela Davis qtd. in Matthews 2017; Watson 1988). Therefore, creating a just pluriverse requires building solidarity and support across disciplinary, racial, and political divides of decolonial studies, critical race theory, area studies, and Indigenous studies and being in dialogue and

learning from one another (Ali and Dayan-Herzbrun 2024; Chakravartty and Jackson 2020; Osman 2019c).

Yet if we continue to privilege the hegemonic discourse of the imperial ruling elite and their sociopolitical industries, they will continue to deal in the usual racial pathologizing and securitized diagnosis, deeming some Afghans valuable and others dangerous to empire, thus dooming Afghanistan to their imperial fantasies of endless wars. Instead, the contributors and editors of this volume, representing a multiplicity of ethnicities, races, and nationalities, offer new analyses, ideas, and case studies to demonstrate that Afghan society and its diasporas are talking back to imperial power and are both envisioning and building a democratic Afghanistan that is part of a global community where everyone has the right to a just and peaceful life: This simple shift in thinking is a decolonial turning point for Afghanistan and Afghan studies.

Volume Overview: Decolonization in Practice

The chapters that follow showcase the many contexts in which various actors have questioned, subverted, and resisted, but also facilitated, colonial power relations. Our authors interrogate the ways in which imperial and colonial projects and imaginaries have historically organized knowledge production about Afghanistan. In particular, they explore the infrastructures, forms of cultural expertise, and technologies that undergirded the US-led War on Terror from 2001 to the present. They also investigate gender politics; the diaspora's use of art, literature, and social media; the relationship between wartime media and propaganda; and the possibilities and challenges of circulating alternative representations of the country and its people in Afghan and diasporic media over the past twenty years.

Decolonizing Afghanistan is organized into four parts. Part 1 examines the historical roots of imperial knowledge production about Afghanistan and how it has manifested in the present. Nivi Manchanda examines the historical mobilization of the tropes of the “graveyard of empires” and “the Great Game” as symptoms of a colonial desire to make sense of Afghanistan while continuing to obfuscate its realities. Robert D. Crews examines the emergence and transformation of the Soviet colonial archive and its consequences for the Soviet war in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 and for the post-2001 American project. Wazhmah Osman reckons with the

contradictions of the American empire, tracking the United States' rise as an imperial global power, its propensity for violence, and the deployment of its vast development apparatus.

Part 2 explores the impact of the discursive and technological infrastructures of power that unfolded during the War on Terror. In an ethnographic account focusing on the role of Afghan Americans in counterinsurgency operations, Morwari Zafar shows how training exercises enacted with the "imperial gaze" repackaged and reenacted "Afghan culture" as a commodified object of knowledge. Journalist Matthieu Aikins examines how the neo-imperial army distanced itself from the bloodshed of civilian casualties via outsourcing to its network of Western-funded private security contractors and how they in turn undermined state-building. Probing another key aspect of colonial knowledge production, Ali Karimi examines how the United States pursued domination of Afghanistan through biometric technologies of identification, which, he argues, reflected the paradox of "too much information and too little knowledge" characteristic of the operative logics of the American intervention.

Part 3 delves into the politics and optics of representations, exploring the salience of media, propaganda, and public relations to the workings of modern warfare and empire. Starting chronologically, Marya Hannun examines how in the early twentieth century gender politics in postindependence Afghanistan became a key object of not only Western but regional conversations around modernity, coloniality, and anti-coloniality. Shifting to investigate transnational media circulation, Hosai Qasmi explores the ways in which Indian cinema's interpellation of Afghans has not been immune from Orientalizing tendencies. She tracks the rise of epic historical Hindutva films about Afghan invasions and despotism and the ways they perpetuate present-day Islamophobia. Purnima Bose critiques the postwithdrawal narratives about Afghan women and their "development idealism" that have resurfaced across media outlets. She argues that these narratives erase earlier traditions of Afghan women's resistance to the Taliban, create a nostalgic view of US occupation, and universalize the experiences of urban Afghan women. Lastly, Dawood Azami examines how US authorities, as part of their counterinsurgency efforts, and the Taliban, as part of their insurgency efforts, waged battles for "hearts and minds" through a variety of media technologies, including radio, television, and print. Azami shows how marketing the war ultimately proved to be futile in a landscape marked by ongoing dehumanization and the violence wrought against social life.

Part 4 looks at how Afghan literature and art evidence a long and rich lineage of political dissent and resistance to colonial paradigms of knowledge. While many of the authors are intricately connected to the subjects of their research by virtue of their Afghan background, the latter chapters take a more directly autoethnographic approach, and/or focus on more direct responses and reflections from Afghans, which offers novel forms of embodied and experiential understandings of self–other relationships. Helena Zeweri examines Afghan Americans’ public critiques of the US immigration system in the aftermath of the evacuations, thereby illustrating how humanitarian crisis can heighten diasporic political consciousness of the effects of imperialism. Sabauon Nasserri examines short fiction written between 2001 and 2021 by Afghan authors who connect the everyday survival strategies during the Afghan Civil War (1992–1996) to those of the post-2001 period. Nasserri’s chapter provides a window into how Afghans have conceptualized the interplay of eras marked by successive regimes of occupation and violence. Such writers, Nasserri argues, unsettle the typical historical narrative of Afghanistan that sees it devolve from a Cold War battleground to a terrorist haven, and from a site of communist aspirations to a site of mujahideen resistance and Taliban authoritarianism. Tausif Noor examines how Afghan diasporic artists reflect on the legacy of the US presence in Afghanistan and resist the tropes of Afghans as disempowered and dependent on US military and humanitarian aid. In an autoethnographic reflection, Gazelle Samizay provides an up-close look at how four hyphenated Afghan artists, including her, responded to the postwithdrawal moment. She delves into how this experience of evacuating some Afghans and not others prompted new entry points for art as dissent in the diaspora, specifically critiques of the US immigration system and of global borders more broadly. And in her exploration of the experiences of Uzbek/Turkic minoritized communities, Zohra Saed, building on interviews with her Baba (father), examines the internal and foreign colonialism and injustices that marginalized communities in the north faced and shows the layers of disparate lived experiences at the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity/race. Finally, in her coda, Paula Chakravartty reflects on the volume as a whole, drawing connections across chapters and highlighting key threads that emerge. She underscores the power of colonial and imperial geopolitics that have produced the conditions for perpetual war and destruction for almost half a century, drawing connections to the imperially sponsored genocide unfolding in Gaza.

Decolonizing Afghanistan focuses not only on the administrative and explicitly violent effects of empire but on how empire impacts people's everyday lives, senses of identity, and the political mobilizations that emerge in the wake of imperial war and withdrawal. In a historical moment in which Afghan nationals, refugees, and diasporic peoples are encountering long-standing as well as new stereotypes about who they are, it is especially important to connect those misrepresentations to early colonial and neo-imperial narratives and missions. Such tropes include the Afghan refugee as a passive suffering subject, Afghan women as only *now* politically conscious, and diasporic peoples and displaced Afghans (specifically former interpreters for the US military) as loyal cultural experts who ideologically believed in the US/NATO war. Long after the US "forever war" and its disastrous conclusion, these reductive characterizations continue to circulate, framing the war as filled with strategic and policy errors while failing to question its premises, its human consequences, or the deeply entrenched ways that the Afghan government and nongovernment actors colluded with US and NATO forces to produce the conditions that led to the Taliban takeover of the government in August 2021. Imperial formations, however, are not failures. They succeeded in the death, destruction, and havoc they have caused in the lives of Afghans all over the world. The authors of the chapters that follow insist it is time to reckon with what has happened.

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